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“The heart and soul of patriotic America”: American conservative women crusading for the “Bricker Amendment” (1953-1957)

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Introduction

1 In the post-WWII period, American conservatism was no univocal movement but its advocates concurred on a number of fundamental principles: they defended a strict construction of the U.S. Constitution, opposed state interventionism and worried about the growing influence of international organizations. Indeed, from 1945, the traditional anti-statist discourse was coupled with a strong anti-internationalist stance as the nascent United Nations became the primary target of the American Right for trying to establish a “world government.” In the early 1950s, so as to restore American sovereignty, a Republican senator from Ohio, John W. Bricker, supported by the most conservative fringe of the Republican Party, proposed an amendment aiming at limiting the President’s power to sign international treaties that might supersede the Constitution. Thousands of women, active in the Republican Party and conservative organizations, coordinated their efforts as the Vigilant Women for the Bricker Amendment (VWBA) in order to sway public opinion (which was much

divided) and pressure their representatives. Notwithstanding the defeat of Senator Bricker’s proposal, the Vigilant Women– among its most fervent defenders – successfully forwarded their anti-statist and anti-internationalist ideas at the grassroots level.

2 An examination of Vigilant Women sheds light on the paramount role women have played in the creation and sustaining of tight and reactive conservative networks at the grassroots. This paper will first set to appraise the political culture and types of activism these postwar conservative women had inherited, before focusing on VWBAitself: presenting its origins, the geographical location of the movement, the profile of its members and the activities they engaged in. This paper will finally consider the significance of the domestic ideology and populist rhetoric in the pro-Bricker Amendment movement’s literature and public discourse.

1 American conservative women’s activism from the 1910s to the 1940s: what legacy for Cold War conservative women?

1.1 Right-wing women during the First Red Scare

3 As historian Michelle Nickerson clearly expounded, right-wing women who joined the conservative movement in the late 1910s and 1920s had a considerable impact as they helped redefine the fields the conservative ideology had been historically concerned with. Champions of classic liberalism, as proponents of *laissez-faire*, had objected to state intervention in economic affairs; partly as a result of women’s growing involvement in the conservative movement, state interventionism in another domain – the so-called private sphere – became of equally utmost importance.[i] During the first Red Scare (1919-1920) these right-wing women, mainly active in the northeast and High-Midwest, worried about the menaces communism seemingly posed to family as an institution – threats notably revealed by the Overman Committee[ii] (1918-19), which in investigating bolshevism, gave a prominent place to so-called private matters as the committeemen heard testimonies about the many ways Soviet Russia sought to destroy family by legalizing abortion, facilitating divorce procedures or encouraging “free love.” The sanctity of home had to be shielded from the influence of a Soviet-like

intrusive government so that conservative women soon leveled criticism at Progressives, whose maternalist approach called for the development of a tight relation, not solely between mother and father, but between mothers and the welfare state at the risk of seeing family – in particular women and children – nationalized.[iii]

1.2 Right-wing women during the 1930s and 1940s: the emergence of the mothers’ movement

4 In the 1930s, it was the *New Deal* program that right-wing women lambasted; they maintained that the welfare state it established dangerously extended the power and sphere of action of the federal State. They engaged massively in the isolationist movement, building the far-rightmothers’ movement, fiercely opposed to Franklin D. Roosevelt’s foreign policy. These ultraconservative women differed from preceding generations of right-wing patriotic women as they unabashedly resorted to a rhetoric tinged with anti-Semitism. They also adopted a more confrontational style of activism: the far-right women learnt from “housewife activism,”[iv] the political action and style of the Depression-era working-class housewives who staged meat boycotts and anti-eviction protests, “introduc[ing] a populist outlook to female politics.”[v] Their appropriation of such “housewife populism” helped demonstrate that they too somehow formed a movement of ordinary and marginalized people, struggling against the elites, although most of the mothers’ movement’s leaders belonged to the middle and upper classes.

5 In the immediate aftermath of WWII, most conservative groups toned down their anti-Semitism but some ultraconservative women’s organizations such as We The Mothers, Mobilize for America unwaveringly defended anti-Jewish conspiracy theories. As conservatives found themselves a new nemesis, the UN, right-wing women began contrasting the “world government” with the American mother figure. While, they asserted, American mothers raised their children in the love of God and cardinal principles of liberty and individualism, the UN – especially through UNESCO programs – strove to secularize education, promote miscegenation and homogenize the American youth so that they adhere to internationalist thought.[vi]

6 Vigilant Women for the Bricker Amendmentwas to rely heavily on the populist turn taken by right-wing women in the 1930s and 1940s, but its leaders would cautiously deny any linkage with them and endeavor to renew with a less aggressive political style and burnish their image.

2 Cold War conservative women, domesticity and the growth of "kitchen table" activism

2.1 American women's growing political participation

7 Conservative women's political action after the war needs to be examined against the backdrop of the early Cold War culture which concurrently emphasized domesticity[vii] and women's moral obligation to increase their civic and political engagement. Women in the post-WWII era were long regarded as largely apolitical or under-politicized, but since the 1980s historians have shown the multiple forms of activism women from left to right adopted during the "doldrums," whether they kept fighting for the Equal Rights Amendment[viii] or fanatically undertook red-hunting activities.[ix]

8 After WWII, American women's accelerating process of politicization – in terms of both electoral participation and mobilization as campaign workers – led many contemporary media observers to state that the early 1950s marked a turning point for women in American politics.[x] They focused on the landmark 1952 election campaign during which political parties – most particularly the GOP – put more effort than ever before into getting women's vote. Since the early 1940s, women voters had potentially outnumbered male voters, a fact which was frequently splashed across the media[xi] but it was not until 1952 that a majority of the female electorate went to the polls.[xii] What is more, women voters favored the victorious Republican candidate Dwight D. Eisenhower much more than men did, which rekindled the debate over the so-called "woman's vote," only to prompt more "wooing."[xiii]

2.2 The growth of home-based political activism

9 Despite a higher voter turnout and greater mobilization as volunteer campaign workers, the shape of women's political activism had little changed. After American women were enfranchised in 1920, some trailblazers did enter the

political arena but the great majority continued to work within women’s organizations and clubs. Post-WWII America, marked by the resurgence of the ideology of separate spheres, fostered a particularly propitious climate for female activism along such separatist lines.

10 The suburban home, symbolized more often than not by the kitchen, came to be seen as the locus of female sociability as *kaffeeklatsches*[xiv] and home sale parties were more than ever part and parcel of women’s lives. The home and the many activities conducted there could function as a “forum for the politicization of women,” especially housewives.[xv] The notion that “woman’s place is in the home” doing politics visibly gained traction in partisan politics as well as suggested, for instance, by NFRW (National Federation of Republican Women) President Mrs. Carroll D. Kearns’ promotion of the “porch and patio approach” which aimed to bring women’s activities and programs closer to home during the 1956 election.[xvi] Conservative women’s organizations seem to have capitalized even more than others on home-based or “kitchen table” activism.[xvii] The front page of the anticommunist organization Minute Women for the USA’s newsletter perfectly illustrates this politicization of domesticity as it featured an American home interestingly described as “the national headquarters” of this anticommunist organization.

11 It was within this particular political and social framework that VWBA was to emerge in response to the increasingly urgent demand for reviewing treaty law; the group’s full use of “kitchen table” activism was to prove quite effective at the outset.

3 “The Fight for the Bricker Amendment is On!”

3.1 The early campaign for an amendment limiting treaty power

12 As the U.S. became more involved in international organizations, joining the United Nations in 1945 and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in 1949, vocal proponents of national sovereignty and states’ rights vehemently condemned the numerous treaties signed under the aegis of these organizations which they thought would constitute an infringement of American citizens’ rights, should they become the law of the land. The American Bar Association (ABA), then presided by Frank E. Holman,

strenuously opposed the Covenant on Human Rights proposed by the U.N. Commission on Human Rights in 1948 and the Genocide Convention in 1949. Holman launched a campaign whose aim was to offer a protection against abuse of the treaty power. His writings influenced John W. Bricker “who would become the political champion and namesake of Holman’s movement to amend the Constitution.”[xviii] In 1951, the Republican Senator from Ohio introduced a first resolution (S. Res. 177) against the Covenant of Human Rights, which he argued contained provisions that denied rights (e.g. freedom of speech in times of national emergency) otherwise guaranteed to all American citizens by the U.S. Constitution. As for the Genocide Convention, it established that hate crimes (against racial or religious groups) had to be brought before an international court. This particularly incensed conservative Republicans and southern Segregationists in the Democratic Party who feared the United Nations might intervene in American affairs by advocating federal civil rights legislation, thus curtailing states’ rights.[xix] The “Bricker Amendment” was therefore an act of rebellion against the aggrandized powers of the federal government and presidential function under Franklin D. Roosevelt. The Bricker resolution, not acted upon, was followed by the two first versions (S.J. Res 102 in 1951 and S.J. Res 130 in 1952) of what was to be henceforth known as “the Bricker Amendment.” In 1952, Bricker’s revised version of the amendment was co-sponsored by 58 Senators. The amendment caused controversy at first but considering the solid support the bill enjoyed within the Republican ranks in Congress (only one Republican Senator had refused to co-sponsor it), the Republican platform in the 1952 election quite unsurprisingly endorsed the measure: “We shall see to it that no treaty or agreement with other countries deprives our citizens of the rights guaranteed them by the Federal Constitution.”[xx]

13 In 1953, Bricker stepped up his fight; his new bill was co-sponsored by 63 Senators, i.e. the two-thirds vote needed to adopt a constitutional amendment. Dwight D. Eisenhower saw the measure as an attempt to undermine presidential authority in foreign policy and found it redundant as it basically was “an addition to the Constitution that said you could not violate the Constitution.”[xxi] The president sought a compromise with Bricker, quite unsuccessfully, and publicly expressed his opposition during a press conference on

March 26 1953. While the bill was stalled in committee, Bricker led the fight in the Senate against another proposed treaty, the NATO Status of Forces treaty, in order to preserve the right of American soldiers abroad to be tried under American law, as guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution:

> The flag follows our soldiers abroad. The Constitution must likewise follow them. I cannot acquiesce in, or regard as permanent, the dangerousprocedure established by the criminal jurisdiction provisions of the NATO Status of Forces Agreement under which, for the first time in American history, American soldiers abroad are subject to trial under foreign law and denied the Constitutional protections to which they are entitled.[xxii]

14 In June 1953, the Judiciary Committee eventually brought Bricker's measure to the Senate floor. When the session adjourned, no action had been taken on the bill but it gave time to the backers of the "Bricker Amendment" to start organizing their popular campaign in anticipation of the debates that were to resume in January 1954.

3.2 Vigilant Women for the Bricker Amendment (1953-57): origins, organization and membership profile

15 In August 1953 eight women from the Great Lakes region gathered in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and created Vigilant Women for the Bricker Amendment. According to one of the founders, Ruth Murray, the amendment represented the best chance to unify conservatives, as she later told the Senate Judiciary Sub-Committee headed by Senator Estes Kefauver in May 1955: 'It seemed to be the one banner around which all defenders of American sovereignty could rally."[xxiii] They adopted the torch-bearing hand as a symbol for their own enlightenment and alertness and "the battle for the Bricker Amendment is On!" as a motto. The campaign was launched in Wisconsin and Illinois in September 1954 and "mushroomed into national proportions simply through the correspondence of women "alarmed at the danger" to domestic law represented by the treaty-making powers of the President."[xxiv]

16 Vigilant Women denied being an ordinary women's group and underlined its particularly loose organization. Winifred Barker (Illinois) and Ruth Murray (Wisconsin), the national coordinators, were aided by state/regional coordinators. Within a year of creation, VWBA was found on the whole territory. It met with particular success in the Midwest, where the movement originated, and in California. The

membership is often wrongly estimated to be 300,000 members in the peak year of 1954, based on the number of signatures the group succeeded in gathering. In 1955, however, the monthly *Vigilant Women Newsletter* was sent to a little over 5,000 subscribers only.[xxv]

17 Vigilant Women defined itself as a nonpartisan organization supported by volunteers only; needless to say, most of the members were actually affiliated with the GOP and the leaders were hardly what one would call rank amateurs. The group was officially open to all women: no mention about members’ race, ethnicity or class was made, but the “Brickerettes”[xxvi] were characteristically white Christian middle and upper-class women.[xxvii] The group was composed of non-working women in majority and this was precisely in these terms that the two national coordinators liked to describe themselves: “We are just ordinary housewives.”[xxviii] Most *Vigilant Women* activists were middle-aged women who had raised their children, taking advantage of their free time and means to become more active in politics. To portray the members as “just ordinary housewives”, however, is to overlook some of the members’ political and professional achievements. Some of them were assuming great responsibilities (and in some cases, had been for years) within the GOP or women’s organizations, such as the hereditary society Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR). Others did not necessarily match the typical profile constructed by Murray because they were actually working, mostly in the professions: as teachers, writers, or doctors. Thus, the New York State coordinator, Lucille Cardin Crain, was a former teacher and had been editor of the *Educational Reviewer* (1949-1953), funded by Catholic conservative William F. Buckley, Sr., in order to detect possible subversive and “collectivist” ideas in school books. Dr. Nell K. McCue, the Oregon coordinator, was Director of the Capital Business College in Salem, Oregon; not what we would consider an “ordinary housewife.” Finally, a younger generation of conservative women in their early thirties, like Phyllis Schlafly or national coordinator Winifred Barker’s own daughter, Eugenia Joyce Houle, was also active while they raised their young children. The membership was therefore much more diverse than what Ruth Murray asserted.

18 What all these women had in common was a crusading spirit: the members were intensely religious, frequently

equating Christianity with Americanism. The group seemed to appeal to Protestant and Catholic women alike. All the Vigilant Women regarded themselves as crusading "patriots" fighting against the establishment of a communist "world government." This commonly-used "patriot" label obscured the ideological heterogeneity of the membership: the leaders of the VWBA movement privately referred to themselves as "patriots," "rebel women," "conservatives" or "libertarians" but seldom addressed the differences that may have existed between them, although they undoubtedly represented different trends of conservatism.

3.3 Vigilant Women's activities and early successes

19 The main goal of the group was to circulate information about the perils of international treaties and Senator Bricker's proposed remedy to defend the Constitution. In the autumn of 1953, one of Vigilant Women's first initiatives was thus to publish and distribute 200,000 copies of a pamphlet entitled "Our Constitution Has a Dangerous Loophole." During the first three months, the group also managed to collect between 300,000 and half a million signatures (depending on the sources) in favor of the amendment – this was to remain their greatest accomplishment. To ensure such success, the group solicited help from other organizations of women, veterans and farmers. In Milwaukee, Ruth Murray arranged a large meeting at the Medford Hotel where 22 state-wide organizations were convened; 14 answered the call, the majority of their delegates pledging to circulate petitions and hand out literature. Ruth Murray invited two pro-Bricker speakers – Representative Lawrence H. Smith (Racine) and Milwaukee attorney Carl B. Rex – to the Milwaukee meeting to explain the Bricker measure and the considerable dangers awaiting America if it were not to be adopted:

> Under the UN Charter, congress might take over legislation on public, parochial, and private schools, order compulsory medical insurance, or legislate on all labor including the domestic help in your house."[xxix]

20 The last remark on domestics is a definite indication that the audience that day was mostly composed of upper middle-class men and women.

21 Brickerettes' political action truly came in the limelight when they staged a rally in Washington, D.C. in January 1954, before the debates over the Bricker Amendment started. As recounted by Washington correspondent Drew

Pearson, the Vigilant Women "swarmed over Capitol Hill corridors, buttonhol[ed] congressmen, beleaguer[ed] senators, and plant[ed] 'news' bulletins in automobiles."[xxx] Some delegation also called on the chairmen of the Democratic and Republican National Committees; the visit to Secretary of State John Foster Dulles did not occur because, one Oklahoma Vigilant Woman joked, he happened to have "skipp[ed] town because he knew all these women were coming here."[xxxi] The delegation of women met Dwight Eisenhower for 45 minutes on Friday, January 22nd but, according to Frank Holman, this meeting "was very unsatisfactory."[xxxii]Despite the failure of this audience with the President, the 500 women or so coming from all over the country (36 states in total) to demonstrate their support for the Republican Senator's proposal captured the attention of many. The *Los Angeles Times* covered the California women participating to the march and featured a picture of Ruth Murray after she had delivered a massive pile of petitions to Sen. Bricker on January 25 while the *New York Times* had chosen a photograph of three Vigilant Women impressively "wrapped" in the petition.[xxxiii] Not only did the gathering in Washington arouse media interest, it was also an opportunity for "the women who ha[d] been leading this drive to meet each other face to face – for most of them, for the first time."[xxxiv] Few large-scale events were planned besides the January 1954 rally in Washington. At the local level, meetings were occasionally organized in the members' homes but "virtually all of their business . . . [was] transacted by mail or telephone." Letter-writing to editors and Congressmen remained their primary and most effective activity:

> That mail is one of the primary reasons why GOP Senate leaders have been making such valiant efforts to reach some compromise acceptable both to the Bricker forces and to the Administration. They fear that continued opposition by the State Department and the White House will rebound to the disadvantage of Republicans in November [1954 mid-term elections].[xxxv]

22

Notwithstanding the lobbying work of the Vigilant Women, the controversial Bricker Amendment received a vote of only 52-40 in favor. Democratic Senator Walter George (Georgia) proposed a milder version (known as the George Amendment) which failed by one vote in February 1954. The Vigilant Women rapidly intensified the campaign and distributed literature which revealed the Senators' voting record, and named and shamed the organizations (such as the League of Women Voters, the Young Women's Christian Association, the National Association for the

Advancement of Colored People, or the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith) which had come out against the amendment. A good way for Vigilant Women to remind members of the political power they could have in the coming mid-term elections of November 1954. In the meantime, Bricker introduced yet another amendment (S.J. Res 1) in August 1954, to no avail. In 1955, in order to sustain their "program of education," VWBA had to launch a fundraising campaign which allowed them to print 300,000 copies of "Why We Need the Bricker Amendment" and circulate other such articles, speeches and pamphlets regarding treaty law.

3.4. Vigilant Women for the Bricker Amendment "on its way out" (1956-57)

23 Interestingly, in early 1954, Frank Ezekiel Holman had insisted on the necessity for pro-Bricker women to keep fighting "for eight or nine years" if need be.[xxxvi] Vigilant Women therefore protested vigorously against the several revised versions proposed after the defeat of both the Bricker and the George amendments in February 1954. In their November 1955 newsletter, they warned "vigilant workers" to "beware of toothless substitutes for the Bricker Amendment":

> We would rather have no treaty-control amendment than one which fails adequately to protect personal rights and American sovereignty against dangerous international agreements.[xxxvii]

24 Yet, by then, the idea of a compromise had become acceptable to many Brickerites. Sen. Bricker himself had "inexplicably abandoned his crusade"[xxxviii] despite introducing again his amendment as S.J. Res. 1 in 1955 and as S.J. Res. 3 in 1957. The situation left the most zealous conservative women intensely disappointed; after reading a *US News and World Report* from March 1956 which presented the last version of the "Bricker Amendment" to date [the so-called Dirksen substitute], Lucille Cardin Crain voiced her disillusionment with the main male leaders of the movement: "Hope we will thoroughly examine this [bill] and not be fooled again – and not take Webb's words – or Bricker's or Holman's for everything – after all they still favor the UN."[xxxix] By 1956, rumors of dissolution got around among the right-wing circles; the far-right small-circulation paper *The Revere* thus announced that the VWBA "might be on its way out" as the two leaders were "split over the new Dirksen substitute."[xl] An editorial in the *Clovis News Journal*

recounted that Ruth Murray and Winifred Barker opposed the Dirksen measure for its "verbiage" weakened the original language of the Bricker Amendment. The editorialist accused Bricker and his staff of "being less than helpful" to the movement while praising the indefatigability of the two Vigilant Women leaders. (S)he marveled at the fact that Murray and Barker would not betray their convictions by accepting a watered-down amendment as they had "in effect said, 'Give us our principles, or give our organization death.'" The editorialist finally harbored doubt as to the passage of the Dirksen substitute since it did not have "the force of the Vigilant Women behind it."[xli] The Dirksen treaty amendment did fail to pass. By 1957, the two national coordinators were given the possibility to make a new statement regarding Bricker's latest (and last) resolution (S.J. Res. 3). Ruth Murray wrote on behalf of Winifred Barker and herself that they did not wish to make further comment as their position on the Bricker Amendment remained as unchanged as ever; they would not back an inadequate bill but signaled their readiness to embark on their crusade again:

> . . . we want a strong resolution such as we fought for in the beginning – one which will protect us from not only executive agreements but treaties as well. When such a resolution is again introduced, we will once again join the fight.[xlii]

25 Given that no satisfactory measure was proposed, the popular movement gradually lost momentum and Vigilant Women was eventually disbanded. Even so, the rhetoric underpinning the pro-Bricker movement was to remain well and alive, as one can observe from the frequent attempts conservatives have made since then to resurrect the "Bricker amendment."[xliii]

4 The discourse of Vigilant Women and their allies

4.1 The centrality of the domestic ideology

26 The domestic ideology was central to Vigilant Women's and their male allies' discourse: these "ordinary housewives" considered themselves responsible for protecting home and preserving the fundamental patriotic values which were taught there. When asked by a journalist from the *Reporter* how she tried to explain the amendment and mobilize people, Ruth Murray retorted: "Well, I tell them our homes and children are in danger."[xliv] The leaders of VWBA systematically connected their political involvement with their being housewives and mothers; in

the media they recurrently described the group as “a voluntary organization of housewives and mothers of boys overseas.”[xlv] In her May 1955 statement to the Senate Judiciary Sub-Committee, Ruth Murray was to reiterate the crucial role her identity as a mother played in her political engagement: “Being a mother of four children and a grandmother, I view with alarm any power to make motherhood and its attendant privileges – deciding how and when you’re going to nurse your own baby – appropriate subject for international agreements.”[xlvi] UN intervention in the private domain could but infringe upon women’s (and more specifically mothers’) freedom.

27 Pro-Bricker women made extensive use of such rhetoric rooted in essentialism, but were quite evidently not alone in doing so. In early Cold War America, male and female politicians, Republicans and Democrats, were apt to redefine women’s role and extend their sphere of action but remained attached to a traditional vision of womanhood. Katie Louchheim, Director of Women’s Activities for the DNC from 1953 to 1960, stretched the elastic boundaries of the supposed “women’s sphere” to the world: “Today’s housewife is not only the guardian of her home. In the broader sense, she is the guardian of the future. For a woman’s home today is the world.”[xlvii] Helen Laville considers this extension as a response to the development of nuclear weaponry. Women’s sphere of action became wider as the once-“untouchable domestic haven” came under attack of a nuclear war. Such a threat to home and family made civic and political involvement, including in the international field, a requirement for patriotic American women, all the more so if they were mothers.[xlviii]

28 Overall, conservative women were able and ready to adapt their discourse: with the Bricker Amendment, they participated to a constitutional debate led by influential American jurists, which made them more likely to use their knowledge of law, albeit limited for some, than to deploy traditional arguments regarding gender roles. Lucille Cardin Crain, for instance, hardly capitalized on gender at all when waging the campaign for the BA, although she was convinced that women’s “sixth sense” made them fitter for politics than men. She usually presented Vigilant Women and other women patriots as “rebel” and enlightened citizens rather than housewives and mothers.[xlix] Despite Vigilant Women’s emphasis on education, their decriers questioned their claim to be well-informed and reproached

the group for sponsoring propaganda literature ("Our Constitution Has a Dangerous Loophole") which misquoted the Constitution, having "changed [its] wording" to deceive the readers into thinking that treaties can override the U.S. Constitution when in fact, Frederick W. La Croix wrote to the *Milwaukee Journal*, "it is only the state constitutions and laws that can be overridden by treaties or any federal laws."[l]

29 The male figureheads of the movement seemed to be particularly inclined to using essentialist arguments. John Bricker emphasized the nobleness of Vigilant Women's action: they stood as "the heart and soul of patriotic America."[li]As for his assistant, Charles A. Webb, he evoked innate differences between men and women activists, extolling what he called "the feminine mind." To Webb, women represented the ideal grassroots activists not only because they had more time on their hands (assuming that women were generally housewives) but also because they possessed a unique trait of character: they displayed greater perseverance than men for they tended to believe in the impossible. He cited the example of a Texas woman who wrote her Senator asking a copy of the 10,000 executive agreements which Secretary of State Dulles said had been made under NATO only. Reading this list of agreements did not seem such an insurmountable task to carry out for this Brickerite who claimed to "have both the time and the inclination to read them, since [she] d[id] not play either the piano or golf."[lii]

30 Another device male Brickerites employed to mobilize women was to resuscitate the spirit of the suffragist movement; quite ironic when one knows most right-wing women in the early 20th century had vigorously opposed woman's suffrage. Associating the Brickerites with the suffragist movement served two major purposes. First of all, the Brickerites drew a parallel between suffragists, whose fight helped fulfill the original American constitutional promise of democracy and equality, and the Brickerettes' struggle in favor of an amendment that would reaffirm the principle of national sovereignty and safeguard individual liberties. In other words, granting women suffrage and reviewing treaty law both came down to achieving what the Founders had intended, according to Holman:

> Were the first Ten Amendments to our precious Bill of Rights--an "attack" upon the Constitution? (. . .) Was it an "attack" upon the Constitution to amend it to permit

> women to vote? (. . .) Were any of the other amendments proposed and approved by the people of this country an "attack" upon the Constitution?[liii]

31 In the same way, Ruth Murray assured the committee that the campaign for the Bricker Amendment was run along constitutional lines: "the VWBA and like-minded organizations are working in an honest and open manner to amend the constitution in the manner prescribed by the Constitution for its alteration." Like Holman, she reasoned that their method was analogous to that of the suffragists in as much as it consisted in waging a patient, legalistic campaign, not a revolutionary and direct assault on the Constitution as the detractors had it: "You would be well advised, gentlemen, not to suggest to your female constituents that they obtained the right to vote by means of an assault upon the Constitution."[liv] The second objective was quite obviously to remind the "Brickerettes" that another movement led by women activists had met with success even if victory had been won after a long and difficult fight. Frank Holman was fond of this comparison and called the rally in Washington, D.C. in January 1954 a "pilgrimage," reminiscent of the heyday of women's activism in the suffrage movement, and even advised Vigilant Women to organize parades as the suffragettes had done.[lv]

4.2 The populist rhetoric of Vigilant Women

32 Another key component of VWBA's discourse was its populist rhetoric. According to Ruth Murray's statement to the Senate Judiciary Sub-Committee, the VWBA was born out of spontaneous grassroots outrage at the abuse of treaty power. In fact, a large network of conservative women's groups mobilized their resources to form VWBA, as historian Allan J. Lichtman explained: "The DAR and Minute Women fired up their telephone networks to form the Vigilant Women for the Bricker Amendment."[lvi] VWBA was, to a certain extent, an extension of these two organizations – their temporary lobbying arm. The media thus noted that many women at the Washington rally in January 1954 wore a Minute Women badge. Several leaders of VWBA were known to be part of DAR too. One of Vigilant Women's founders, Sara Roddis Jones, was even to become president of the patriotic organization in the mid-1970s.

33 Members objected to defining VWBA as an organization *per se* and to using overly political wording: "[VWBA is]

probably the least organized organization ever to come to your attention.”[lvii]When addressing the Senate Judiciary Sub-Committee, Ruth Murray may have wanted to conceal connections with well-established conservative organizations in order to reinforce the independent and nonpolitical character of the VWBA. Minute Women’s founder and first president, Suzanne Stevenson, had actually encouraged a semi-secret policy which owed much to the members’ fear of being infiltrated, as recounted by Ellen McClay (pen name of conservative activist and author Gene Birkeland).[lviii] Members were asked to “act only as individuals” as the newsletter made it clear: “The Minute Women never take action as a pressure group.” Indeed, Stevenson reckoned that their patriotic campaign would be more effective if members were perceived as aroused citizens embracing the cause individually and spontaneously.[lix] Additionally, as Erin M. Kempner argued, “the feigned spontaneity and individual nature of Minute Women work also protected the group from censure, since the organization denied responsibility for any and all organized protest.”[lx] VWBA undeniably acted more openly than MWUSA, although they manifestly pursued the same approach regarding spontaneity and individuality.

34 It must be said as well that conservative women were eager to prove their superiority as enlightened women, able to think for themselves, refusing the socialistic “packaged thinking” most liberal women’s organizations were accused of serving to their uninformed, docile members.[lxi] Indeed, the bitter rivalry between Progressive and conservative women activists in the 1920s was revived in 1948 by the publication of an essay entitled “Packaged Thinking for Women,” co-authored by Lucille Cardin Crain and Anne Burrows Hamilton and published as an *American Affairs* pamphlet.[lxii] As soon as 1946, Lucille C. Crain had started urging the necessity for the publication of a pamphlet on how “so many [women] have been used, largely through perfectly innocent organizations to which they belong, to promote. . . a plan of ‘international collectivism’.”[lxiii] Insistence on the nonpartisanship and independence of VWBA helped provide a sharp contrast with the naivety of liberal ladies “swallowing whole” international plans and Truman’s policies.[lxiv]Finally, it might be that Ruth Murray attempted to distance the VWBA from Minute Women, which was quite controversial from its inception, due to the ambiguous relations some of the group’s leaders had

cultivated with notorious anti-Semitic and white supremacist figures whose writings were publicized in their newsletter.[lxv] Much to observers' dismay, the group had regularly and quite unapologetically invited these "hate experts" as guest speakers at their meetings too.[lxvi] In a 1953 award-winning *Houston Post* exposé, reporter Ralph O'Leary had attacked the Minute Women's local Houston, TX, chapter for spreading "a miasmic fear of Communism" and declared it "the most powerful organization of its kind in Houston . . . since the death of the local Ku Klux Klan."[lxvii] At any rate, if the VWBA's public discourse did not highlight the relations with MWUSA, their literature addressed to Brickerites contained extensive references to it and DAR as the other leading patriotic women's organizations endorsing the Bricker Amendment.

35 If the members of VWBA officially defined their organization as an independent and spontaneous grassroots movement, their detractors saw it for what it was, a "professionally-organized group." A 1954 *Miami News* editorial informed the readers that VWBA had been formed by patriotic women's organizations: "How did they become Vigilant Women? Part of the story (…) indicates there are energetic influences in women's organizations (….)"[lxviii] Sen. Kefauver challenged Ruth Murray's statement that Vigilant Women "acted as individuals" and pointed out that VWBA might have to register with Congress as a lobbying group under the requirements of the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946 as they were "operating for the purpose of trying to influence legislation." To which Mrs. Murray responded: "We are not an organization."[lxix] Historian Allan Lichtman contends that Vigilant Women represented a highly-organized grassroots movement; in some measure, some of its members (he takes young Illinois activist Phyllis Schlafly as an example) even proved to "out-organize" the pro-Bricker men.[lxx]

36 Some opponents of the Bricker measure – like Republican Sen. Alexander Wiley from Wisconsin – also suggested that the group was financed by "Texas oil money" so that Ruth Murray had to certify to the Senate Judiciary Sub-Committee that the organization was financed mostly by small ($5) contributions and leaders' own funds in order to preserve the anti-elitist character of their crusade, declaring whenever she could that Vigilant Women were "just people."[lxxi] Mrs. Sara Roddis Jones, from Wisconsin, directly answered Wiley's attacks in the press: "We resent

statements from Senator Wiley and others that we are a well-financed organization. We are financed only by our husbands!"[lxxii] Such assertions reinforced the notion that members were primarily housewives and depended on their husbands' support (financial and other) whereas some VW state leaders were born into wealth and/or earned a living. What is more, Mrs. Henry Jones and her co-workers constantly repeated that printing pamphlets or making trips to the Capitol actually made them lose money, which contributed to presenting them as principled women willing to make sacrifices for a cause they were genuinely committed to.

37 Even more remarkably, Ruth Murray purported she and Winifred Barker had no "unique talent or special competence for the work in which [they were] engaged," hammering home again the message that they lacked political training and that just any woman could take up and further the cause. Knowing that many of the Vigilant Women coordinators were civic leaders or even served as presidents or vice-chairwomen of state Republican clubs, such undue emphasis on Vigilant Women's lack of political skills clearly indicates their will to pass for a non-political movement. In that way, Murray seemed to agree with Holman who professed that the amendment was not a "political" issue since it received bipartisan support.[lxxiii] As a matter of fact, Murray went a bit further as she envisioned the movement first and foremost as a crusade.[lxxiv]

38 These elements reveal the legacy of conservative women's populist activism and rhetoric in the 1930-40s as identified by Orleck and Nickerson. Nevertheless, VW activists refrained from associating themselves with groups which had wholeheartedly embraced anti-Semitism and were warned not to by Bricker's assistant himself:

> I would like to alert you to the anti-Semitic and hate-mongering publications which have in the past, to our greatest embarrassment, supported the amendment. As an example, I refer you to recent issues of *Women's Voice*.[lxxv] I have never seen so many false statements in so few pages.[lxxvi]

39 Charles A. Webb apparently overlooked the fact that most Vigilant Women were members of groups such as Minute Women, whose record on religious and racial tolerance was all too poor.

Conclusion

40 The domestic ideology which had originally confined women to the “private sphere” quite paradoxically made possible an extension of women’s sphere of influence. Anticommunist and anti-internationalist Cold War women manifestly embraced but also helped challenge this ideology by taking interest in international relations and playing an active role in politics. By joining VWBA, they strove to safeguard the U.S. Constitution by supporting an amendment which would ensure that treaties and executive agreements could not supersede “the supreme law of the land” and strip Americans of their rights. Regardless of the redefinition of housewives’ societal role and place, VWBA still developed a discourse centered on motherhood and domesticity and mainly engaged in “kitchen table” activism (from research activities to letter-writing), making it their key mode of political action. The growth in home-centered activism appeared to signify reconciliation between the many (and at times, contradictory) roles Cold War society assigned to America women.

41 The Vigilant Women, formed at the initiative of prominent women’s conservative organizations, efficaciously poured their human and technical resources into a large-scale grassroots movement. It was long though before historians started taking interest in right-wing women’s activism in the early Cold War years and acknowledging the influence of such behind-the-scenes activism conducted in women’s living rooms and kitchens. Admittedly, VWBA failed as neither the Bricker Amendment nor any of the substitute versions were adopted in Congress. Pro-Bricker women did manage, however, to disseminate anti-internationalist ideas in the media and to unify conservative women around a single issue which they deemed vital to the preservation of national sovereignty. Moreover, they successfully exploited the populist rhetoric deployed by right-wing women as soon as the 1930s while prudently cultivating a more polished and respectable image as militants.

42 The history of the fight for the Bricker Amendment points to the potential and limits of kitchen-table activism for these postwar conservative women. Unquestionably, they found it to be a quite effective and powerful type of activism, building up strong wide networks they could re-

activate whenever necessary; the strength of these grassroots networks were too become manifest in the 1960s. Yet, their choice to perform traditional, more subservient, roles placed conservative women activists in a problematic position: by acting as researchers, educators, publicists or lobbyists only, and consequently remaining on the periphery of the political arena, the Vigilant Women deeply depended on the male leaders of the movement. While the pro-Bricker movement ran out of steam, conservative women's conviction and motivation were still intact. To a certain extent, the outcome of the pro-Bricker Amendment struggle even heightened these women's crusading zeal and created a certain distrust of the Republican political establishment for having accepted compromise and given up the fight too soon.

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ABSTRACTS

This paper will examine the crusade that a group of conservative women, the Vigilant Women for the Bricker Amendment (VWBA), active in the Republican Party and conservative women's clubs, carried out to pressure politicians and sway public opinion in favor of the so-called "Bricker Amendment," devised to limit the treaty-making powers of the President in the 1950s. The VWBA, born out of the efforts of influential anticommunist conservative organizations, successfully promoted anti-statist and anti-internationalist ideas at the local level: in their neighborhood, in women's clubs, at church or in the local press. A case study of Vigilant Women reveals the prominent role these women played in the formation and activation of a large conservative grassroots network. I will examine the prevalence of the domestic ideology and populist rhetoric in the discourse of VWBA and their allies, and try to demonstrate how resurgent domesticity in the post-WWII period shaped these women's activism as they engaged primarily in home-based political action.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Frank Holman, John Bricker, Lucille Crain, Ruth Murray, Winifred Barker

Keywords: anti-internationalism, Bricker amendment, conservative women, Daughters of the American Revolution, domesticity, Inc., Minute Women of the USA, populism, treaty law, Vigilant Women for the Bricker Amendment, "kitchen table" activism

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